

**Campbell, Marilyn A. and Uusimaki, Lisa S. (2006) A pilot study in challenging pre-service education students' anxieties about their practical experiences in professional education. In Haigh, Mavis and Beddoe, Elizabeth and Rose, Dennis, Eds. Proceedings Practical Experiences in Professional Education Conference, pages pp. 60-67, Auckland, New Zealand.**

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## **Abstract**

Most pre-service education students experience transient anxiety about becoming a teacher which decreases as knowledge and skills increase during training. However, some students express continuing anxiety which is distressing and inhibits their learning. This paper will discuss some of the evaluations from a workshop called "*Teaching with Confidence*" that was offered to eighteen pre-service education students experiencing excessive anxiety about their teaching practicum at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. The day long workshop covered teaching strategies, understanding anxiety, coping mechanisms and the supervisory relationship. The pre-service student teachers were also introduced to experiential, small group exercises and role plays. Results from the pilot study demonstrated the need and the demand for workshops that address students' excessive anxiety about their practical experiences. It would seem that the impact of the explanation of the supervision process and the notion of personal power could be empowering for students and warrants further investigation.

**Keywords**    **anxiety pre-service teachers supervision practicum**

It has been long recognised that many pre-service student teachers experience high levels of anxiety about their teaching practicum (Clement, 1999; Enz, 1997; Sanderson, 2003; Tibble, 1959). However, it has also been noted that anxiety will decrease as knowledge and skills develop during teacher training (Parsons, 1973). Nonetheless, while this increased self-confidence towards teaching has been shown to apply to most pre-service students after four to five years of teacher training, studies suggest that even after this period a number of students continue to exhibit excessive anxiety towards their teaching practice (Ohnogi, 1996; Piggf & Marso, 1987).

Excessive anxiety is the most prevalent type of disorder experienced in the general population and is characterised by persistent worry and fear about different activities and events (Myers et al., 1984; Regier et al., 1984; Robins et al., 1984). Research studies (Justice, 1998; Sanderson, 2003) suggest that many pre-service student teachers discontinue with their studies due to excessive anxiety. The anxiety hindered learning (Cassady, 2004), impacted on social competency (Hoffman, 2001) and in some cases led to physical problems

(Justice, 1998). Common concerns that many excessively anxious pre-service student teachers experience weeks prior to their teaching practicum include insomnia, panic attacks and poor eating habits (Sanderson, 2003). Hence, support for excessively anxious pre-service student teachers prior to (and during) their practicum is an essential component of teacher education programs.

Rickinson (1998) identified first year entry and final year completion as crisis points amongst vulnerable pre-services student teachers' capability to successfully adjust and/or change to the demands and expectations of undergraduate degree programs. Her study suggested that further support in the form of counselling interventions that combined both group and individual sessions where pre-service student teachers were encouraged to "share experiences, explore anxieties and gain support from the group" (p.96) were helpful in "facilitating normative cognitive and emotional development and to alleviate developmental arrest" (p.99). In particular, it was found that workshops had been helpful in the development of strategies from managing anxiety in teaching situations and for settling in socially and academically into university life. Likewise in their study Wood, Willoughby, Specht, Stern-Cavalcante and Child (2002) successfully used a series of workshops to help pre-service student teachers overcome excessive anxieties towards teaching. The encouragement of self-reflection (Yourn, 2000) observational learning or modelling with the supervising teacher acting as coach (Romeo, 1985) have also been popular strategies to help encourage pre-service student teachers to cope with their anxieties during their practicum. However, these strategies, while popular with supervising teachers and with less anxious pre-service student teachers, have had limited success with pre-service student teachers with excessive anxiety (Rickinson, 1998).

Groups of students particularly vulnerable to excessive anxiety during field experiences include pre-service student teachers from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) and mature age students (Back & Barker, 2002). Pre-service student teachers from NESB backgrounds experience anxiety related to problems with language and cultural differences (Back & Barker, 2002; Duncan, 2000). Mature aged pre-service student teachers experience anxiety as their feelings of competency are challenged. Kevern and Webb (2003) suggest that mature aged pre-service students have a double life load as they have both their study and their home responsibilities.

While many universities offer units that *touch* on how to handle anxiety during the teaching practicum, it is suggested that this is not enough for the more vulnerable students who suffer from excessive anxiety. There are two reasons that can be identified as to why this is so: (1) there is limited individual support from academic liaison officers because of work loads and cost factors, and (2) there is the reluctance by pre-service student teachers with excessive anxiety to access general support. Anxious pre-service student teachers because of their embarrassment often do not seek the help from counsellors or tutors who are available on campus to assist them. Furthermore, based on cultural factors many NESB pre-service student teachers are especially reluctant to seek help outside their family and friends (Back & Barker, 2002). In order to address these

issues an intervention program was designed. The full intervention includes an introductory all day workshop followed by pairs of students meeting with the facilitators to view short videotapes of the students' teaching for five one-hour sessions. Students will then be supported throughout their practicum by email and phone. A final debriefing workshop will then be offered after the completion of the practicum. Before this intervention is implemented a pilot study was conducted to address the issues of recruitment, including ascertaining whether there was a demand for such an intervention with pre-service education students and to see how many students would self-identify as anxious and commit themselves to the program. In addition, the workshop was trialled to see if it met both the expectations of students and facilitators. This paper reports on a pilot study of the recruitment and workshop phase of the proposed intervention.

## Participants

Sixty-three self-identified anxious pre-service student teachers indicated their interest via email to volunteer for the study that had been advertised in a Student Guild magazine. Flyers of the workshop were also distributed and posted in various notice boards approved and supported by the university guild and the field service office; as well an email attachment from practicum unit course co-ordinators was sent to pre-service student teachers. From the initial 63 enquirers, 25 students attended the information session and eighteen of these participants (15 female and 3 male) undertook the workshops. The ages of the participants were between 19- and 53-years-old. The 18 participants were divided into two groups based on days they were able to attend the workshop. Eight students attended the Friday workshop; four female mature-age participants from NESB backgrounds, two mature-age Australian participants and two 19-year-old Australian female participants. There were 10 students who attended the Saturday workshop (two mature-age Australian male participants, and eight mature-age Australian female participants).

Table 1

*Details of the 18 students who attended the workshops.*

<b>Postgraduate Students</b>	<b>No of students</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> year Early Childhood	1
2 <sup>nd</sup> year Primary	1
2 <sup>nd</sup> year Secondary	6
<b>Undergraduate Students</b>	
3 <sup>rd</sup> year Early Childhood	1
3 <sup>rd</sup> year Primary	2
4 <sup>th</sup> year Primary	4
4 <sup>th</sup> year Secondary	3

## Procedure

The pre-service student teachers were invited to attend an information session prior to the commencement of the workshop. In this information session they were briefed regarding the content that was to be covered. A workshop was delivered in May, before the students commenced their four week practicum in June. The workshop was offered on two different days to participants and consisted of the following three parts;

- 1) Warm up - that covered both content and the process of teaching, theories on performance and general anxiety,
- 2) Personal Strategies used in teaching – this involved presentation skills, introduction to different relaxation strategies, understanding IPR
- 3) Empowerment – covering understanding personal power, mentoring.

The workshop was based on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is widely regarded as the most effective approach for reducing adult anxiety (Nathan & Gorman, 1998). There is growing evidence, that CBT is also effective in reducing anxiety and stress for pre-service teachers (Sumison, 2002; Sumsion & Thomas, 1995; Wilkins-Canter, Edwards, Young, Ramanathar & McDougale, 2001). The *Teaching with Confidence* workshop further refined this approach to include a focus on skills for effectively managing the student-supervisor relationship, which has been identified as the most important component of practice teaching in terms of student grades (Murray-Harvey et al, 2000). All 18 students completed an evaluation form at the end of the workshop day.

## Evaluations

### Student Evaluations of the Workshop

Students completed evaluation sheets at the end of the workshop. The questions were:

- 1) What aspects of the workshop did you like?
- 2) What suggestions do you have to improve the workshop,
- 3) Any other comments or suggestions

### *Aspects of the workshop students liked*

There was a general agreement amongst most participants that the interaction and sharing of ideas between group members was both highly useful as it was enjoyable. Anne exemplified this by stating that, “exchange of ideas from the whole group rather than a lecture style was useful and positive with lots of information given and explained, there was also a positive feel even when addressing negative topics.” Rebecca wrote “being able to put a label on when I get worked up and knowing that there are others like me” was useful. “Comparing other students’ concerns about prac” and “conversing with other students that are nervous about prac” were typical comments.

The students reported that they liked the practical suggestions, such as how to improve their confidence as well as learning to understand and cope with anxiety (breathing techniques, presentation skills, etc). Sue found that “the strategies we were given for coping with anxiety were important for developing confidence”. For participants like Sue, “talking in front of the group was helpful”.

The participants also reported that they felt a sense of belonging in the non-intimidating environment developed by the workshop leaders. Dianne felt that the workshop leader “made the group feel a sense of togetherness”, while Sue reported that she made “us all feel comfortable in sharing our thoughts and feelings”. Ron commented that it “made us feel that we were normal and human.” Importance was also placed on the teaching experience of the workshop leaders. Lyn for instance felt it was important, “hearing from someone who had extensive experience” or, as Shaun commented, “I liked hearing about real teaching experiences”, Mark commented he liked “hearing a teacher’s stories.”

#### *Aspects of the workshop that students would improve.*

Some students wanted to take home information from the workshop such as “an outline of what was covered in the workshop”, while most students wanted more information on behavioural techniques in the classroom, “techniques for dealing with rebuttals from students when they ask a question and the teacher does not know the answer and techniques to get students attention at the start of the lesson” or negotiating the social context of the school, e.g. Lyn “information on how to handle other teachers, principals”. Others wanted more about what student teacher field experiences were really like, such as

“A video showing a pre-service teacher’s teaching action in classroom, and then discussing which part is good and which part needs to improve, then each attender (sic) practice the same scenario and others watch and give feedback.”

Finally the students wanted the workshop to be repeated and more frequently - “perhaps the workshop could be run again next semester throughout a student’s course structure, even if it’s only once a semester. That way, an improvement in a student’s performance would be more evident”, while Ann even thought the workshop “should be made compulsory.”

#### *Workshop leaders’ comments*

The facilitators felt the workshops were well attended and were successful. We were impressed with the commitment of students coming to the workshop on a Saturday and staying all day and the enthusiasm and honesty which they showed. We found that although each facilitator brought a different personality to her teaching, the tight structure of the workshop provided a good outline so that students received a similar experience. It was interesting that on the Friday workshop there were half of the students from a non-English speaking background and on the Saturday the students were nearly all mature-age students.

The most interesting finding however, from our point of view was of the learning that both groups of students experienced from the afternoon session. Realising that anxious students often have low self-esteem and are concerned about evaluation by the supervising teacher, we asked them to consider what power they brought to the supervisory relationship. All answered only in terms of the supervising teacher and how they 'hoped' the teacher would be supportive. None of the students understood about the concept of personal power and how to use this in the supervisory relationship. The role plays of the first meeting with the supervising teacher and the subsequent negotiations seemed to work well.

### **Practicum Results**

Of the 18 workshop participants, three students were not enrolled in a practicum for the year, 14 passed and one failed.

### **Discussion**

It seems clear from this pilot study that there is a need to provide additional support to highly anxious pre-service student teachers prior to the commencement of their practicum, as shown by the number of enquiries from students. It was also found that students were willing to attend the workshop offered and that these workshops were satisfactory as rated by the students and the facilitators. As many vulnerable, anxious students do not usually take the initiative to access help that is available to them, it is interesting to note the large number of students who expressed interest, although many of those who initially responded did not make the commitment to participate. This attrition rate is an important learning from the pilot study. Ways of engaging those who seek initial support will need to be addressed.

By providing additional support to highly anxious teacher education students, the full intervention could address issues of equity in tertiary education, by ensuring that this group of high risk students receive appropriate opportunities to enhance their learning within a supportive environment. The workshop seemed to encourage a shared commitment between participating students and the facilitators by providing the supportive environment.

One of the most interesting findings in the workshop was the impact of the explanation about the supervisory relationship with the field experience teacher. All of the students in the workshops were intrigued by the concept of their own personal power in this relationship. They had conceptualized it as only position power and the role plays which followed in negotiating that relationship seemed to influence them. Perhaps more relationship work prior to field experience is needed as all successful teaching includes a good teacher to student relationship (Lefevre, 2005). In addition, if pre-service students can be taught not to concentrate on themselves as 'teacher as performer' but to focus on the learning of the pupils then this could help alleviate some of the anxiety they face in their field experience. This will then enhance the quality of learning they provide to their future students and potentially reduce their own risk for stress-related work problems and early exit from the profession. If the whole

intervention proves to be successful it may be modified for application with other tertiary students who undertake field experiences such as nursing and psychology and counselling students.

What was learnt from this pilot study

The demand for an intervention program was established by the pilot study. However, with over 5000 students taking an education degree, that could mean (on the basis of 10% of the population having an anxiety disorder) that 500 students are excessively anxious and could need this kind of intensive support. Only 63 however enquired and we do not know if this could be improved by more effective advertising or if student reluctance to self identify is a problem, or the time commitment was too great. The significant attrition rate from 63 student enquiries, to 25 students attending the briefing sessions to 18 students participating in the workshop is an issue to be addressed. There is also the problem of such an intervention program being very resource intensive. Most higher education is driven by cost efficiencies which usually means 'mass' or 'bulk' education. The small number of students who can be assisted in a program also has implications for the sustainability of the program.

## **Conclusion**

This pilot study showed that there is a demand at QUT for an intervention which addresses pre-service teachers anxiety about their practicum and that students will attend an all day workshop addressing this issue. The pilot also highlighted a significant attrition issue as well as the difficulty of evaluating the success of the workshop based only on the pass fail of the practicum.

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